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## Statement submitted by Human Rights Advocates, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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## Statement

# The problem of food security for rural women and the impact of household food security on women's personal security

### Introduction

This statement addresses the challenges facing rural women in achieving food security, focusing specifically on women's access to natural and productive resources, the association between household food security and poverty and the impact of food insecurity on women's personal security. In 1979, the General Assembly highlighted the importance of these issues in their adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. In particular, article 14 acknowledges the role that rural women play in the economic survival of their households and sets forth the appropriate measures State parties must take to eliminate discrimination against women in rural areas and strengthen women's role in rural development. Although 187 States are party to the Convention, rural women continue to face sizeable gender gaps in agricultural production, household poverty, income-generating opportunities and personal security.

### National food security: women's access to natural and productive resources

National food security is largely dependent on the work of rural women in the agricultural sector. According to the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) in 2011, rural women produce approximately 50 per cent of the world's food. However, unequal access to natural and productive resources, such as land, credit, technology, and education, stymies women's agricultural productivity. By removing these obstacles, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) estimates that rural women could raise the total agricultural output by 2.5 to 4 per cent, thereby reducing world hunger by 12 to 17 per cent (FAO, *The State of Food and Agriculture 2010-11: Women in Agriculture – Closing the Gender Gap for Development*, Rome 2011).

While access to land and financial assets are at the core of ensuring agricultural productivity, rural women have consistently been disadvantaged in their availability. With regard to land, women across all developing countries are less likely to own and operate land, and the land they do have access to is often of poorer quality and frequently mediated through a male relative. For example, the World Bank reported that in 2009, women in Mexico accounted for only 22.4 per cent of registered landholders in communal farming lands, while that figure fell to less than 10 per cent in India, Nepal and Thailand. Moreover, access to land is incontrovertibly linked to financial assets, such as credit. Institutional discrimination by public and private lenders often pushes women out of the market or grants them considerably smaller loans than men. This is especially true in Japan and the Republic of Korea, where tradition affords membership of credit cooperatives only to heads of household, which in these patriarchal societies is typically a man.

Additionally, women face similar challenges in their access to technology and education, both of which are vital to agricultural productivity. With respect to technology, gender gaps are prevalent among a host of farming technologies, ranging from fertilizers to machinery. For example, in Ghana, only 39 per cent of

female farmers, as opposed to 59 per cent of male farmers, adopted improved crop varieties because they had fewer natural and productive resources. This gap can also be explained by lower levels of human capital among rural women, primarily in education. Although studies have shown that education is strongly correlated with agricultural productivity and household welfare, there continues to be a widespread bias against women in education. This is most evident in Ghana, where women have an average of approximately 2.5 years of education, compared with 5 years for men.

**Household food security: women and poverty**

Even with a thriving agricultural sector, rural women continue to face challenges in creating food and nutritional security within their households. In most rural areas, a major challenge to household food security stems from women's dual role of providing income for their households and tending to domestic responsibilities, which typically include food preparation, childcare and gathering household necessities (see written statement entitled "Anchoring food security amongst rural women subsistence farmers: Ghana as a model", submitted by Human Rights Advocates at the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women). All activities considered, studies have found that women generally work longer hours than men. In fact, a microstudy in India found that on a one-hectare farm, women worked 3,485 hours per year, compared with 1,212 hours for men. The extent of women's work is also evident in Ghana, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia, where women are responsible for 65 per cent of all transport activities in rural households, including the collection of fuel and water, in addition to completing their domestic tasks. Consequently, these trade-offs in the allocation of women's time leave few options for labour market participation, particularly in the agricultural sector.

Given that income is indicative of a household's ability to secure food, poverty is also a major threat to the food security of rural women in developing countries. In recent years, the percentage of female-headed households has risen dramatically, and evidence has shown that these households are overrepresented among the poor. The 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action recognized that this overrepresentation is largely due to wage discrimination, occupational segregation and other gender-based barriers. For example, in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, 55 per cent of rural households are headed by women, a majority of whom are more likely to work in the informal labour market and make less than half the salary of a man employed in similar activities.

**The impact of food insecurity on women's personal security**

As a result of poverty and food insecurity, rural women are also at an increased risk of violence, particularly domestic violence. Although domestic violence occurs across all socio-economic classes, impoverished women are more likely to experience it. When men with low socio-economic status are unable to provide for their families, they may resort to violence, particularly against their wives or partners, out of frustration and hopelessness. In India, where poverty affects almost 30 per cent of the rural population, a United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) survey of violence against women found that in 94 per cent of cases, the victim and her attacker were related, and in 90 per cent of those cases, the wife was victimized by her husband. Moreover, the same survey revealed that 9 out of every 10 murders of women were the result of husbands killing their wives.

Domestic violence is also a common occurrence within the "private sphere" in places with large marginalized rural populations such as Nicaragua, the second poorest country in Latin America. In fact, reports indicate that 30 per cent of Nicaraguan women between the ages of 15 to 49 have been abused by their husband or partner (see Marina Prieto-Carrón, "Gender-based violence in the lives of Nicaraguan women maquila workers", Central America Women's Network Newsletter, No. 21, 2006). Even more alarming is the number of women who suffer in complete silence; studies show that 37 per cent of Nicaraguan women who endure physical violence at the hands of their husbands never speak to anyone about it.

Rural women living in hunger and poverty are also more vulnerable to human trafficking. UNFPA notes that traffickers are able to operate in this context, where they can exploit the uncertain economic situations of impoverished women. For example, South Asia accounts for 40 per cent of the world's absolute poor who live on less than a dollar per day, and have an estimated 2 million women participating in the commercial sex trade. Indeed, 35 per cent of girls and women trafficked from Nepal to India were brought under the pretext of better paying jobs and relief from poverty.

Moreover, vulnerability to human trafficking has also resulted from changing patterns in migration. In Ecuador, where 42 per cent of the population lives in poverty, desperate socio-economic conditions drive men to migrate out of the country in search of employment. Without a steady stream of household income, the women left behind become even more impoverished, increasing the likelihood that they — and their daughters — will become victims of trafficking.

**Recommendations**

We urge Governments to take appropriate measures to increase food security for women living in rural areas by researching and implementing programmes aimed at achieving the following:

- Increasing the number of rural women in local and national decision-making bodies to address gender inequalities in agricultural production, particularly women's access to natural and productive resources, as well as access to human capital.
- Reducing poverty in rural areas, particularly in women-headed households, by increasing the percentage of female employment, eliminating wage disparities between the sexes and addressing the complex trade-offs rural women make in their allocation of time that prevents their participation in the labour market.
- Eliminating violence against women by passing and enforcing national legislation, criminalizing all forms of gender-based violence, including but not limited to, intimate partner violence, rape, sexual assault and "femicide", and ensuring that the perpetrators of these crimes are prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.
- Educating children on the principles of gender equality from their earliest stages of development with the goal of eliminating institutional and social forms of patriarchy, which has served as the taproot and leading justification for discrimination against women in both the public and private spheres of society.